

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
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**FRIENDLY CENTERS OF GRAVITY:  
DOES ANYONE CARE?**

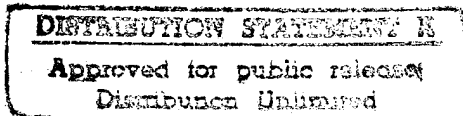
by

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.



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Abstract of

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Analysis of three historical examples (the invasion of Sicily in 1943, the Vietnam War, and Operation Desert Storm), demonstrates both successes and failures in America's efforts at own COG protection. In *most* cases, America emerged victorious, sometimes due largely to luck. Clearly, luck cannot be counted on to win wars. America must do better.

In light of the changing face of American combat scenarios, it is simply unacceptable to neglect a comprehensive plan for protection of one's own COG. Due to the impact of Operation Desert Storm as a world-wide training tool, America's increased dependence on information technologies on the digital battlefield, increased public scrutiny of military spending, planning, and operations, and the likelihood of more "academically astute" future aggressors, America's strategic and operational planners must dramatically increase the level of attention focused on protecting friendly centers of gravity.

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# FRIENDLY CENTERS OF GRAVITY: DOES ANYONE CARE?

## INTRODUCTION

To attain victory in armed conflict, the warrior must leave no stone unturned in his preparation for battle. Among his primary concerns is accurate determination of the enemy's strengths and vulnerabilities and how to attack and exploit each. The most critical of the enemy's strengths is known as his center of gravity, or COG. In addition to planning for these enemy capabilities, the successful strategist must also protect his own assets...*so why doesn't he?*

As a rule, American strategic and operational planners devote considerable attention to the analysis of enemy centers of gravity as an avenue to a successful plan for war. Numerous historical examples exist which show that sufficient emphasis is not always directed toward identifying and protecting one's *own* centers of gravity.

As Sun Tzu prophetically stated in the sixth century B.C., "To be certain to take what you attack is to attack a place the enemy does not protect."<sup>1</sup> Even a marginally talented enemy strategist will go to great lengths to neutralize his opponents' COGs. This is an especially logical strategy for a numerically or technologically inferior adversary. To expect him to do otherwise is to demonstrate an unflattering

combination of arrogance and ignorance, while simultaneously risking a humiliating defeat. It is incumbent on the commander to ensure that it is not his own centers of gravity that are left unprotected.

Although the United States has demonstrated the ability to correctly apply these essential skills, it has also shown the distinct capacity to neglect them, resulting in failure to achieve national objectives. Indeed, the United States has shown only *random* rather than *masterful* effectiveness at proper identification and protection of it's own COGs. Now is the time to devote increased attention to this critical aspect of operational protection.

### **Definition of Center of Gravity**

Throughout history, military strategists have focused their efforts on planning for war. One of their principle concerns is the center of gravity. Noted strategist Carl Von Clausewitz defined the center of gravity as "...the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends."<sup>2</sup> COG is further described as, "...that aspect of the enemy's overall capability that, if attacked, neutralized, or destroyed, will lead to the enemy's inevitable defeat or force him to abandon his aims."<sup>3</sup>

The concept of center of gravity is equally valid when applied to all levels of war; strategic, operational, and

tactical. This analysis is focused on the strategic and operational levels of war as these are at the core of the principles of operational design.

It is the strategic level of war that drives subsequent planning. "The strategic level is dominant in the continuum of war because it is at this level that the political, economic, military, and other aims and objectives are defined....The strategic COG serves as the link between strategic aims and the operational employment of forces by the Commander in Chief."<sup>4</sup>

The U.S. Army's keystone document, FM 100-5, contrasts strategic and operational COGs. Their differences are succinctly stated as follows:

The operational level COG is..."that characteristic, capability, or locality from which the force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight."...It can be the mass of the enemy force,...a vital command and control center, or perhaps its logistical base or lines of communication.

At the strategic level,...a COG may be an economic resource or locality, allied cohesion, the mental and psychological balance of a key commander, or something even more intangible such as morale or the national will.<sup>5</sup>

An understanding of the criticality of correctly determining the *enemy's* centers of gravity is solidly at the forefront of operational design.<sup>6</sup> The necessity for an introspective analysis of *one's own assets*, however, has not provoked the same sense of urgency.

The concept of operational protection is fundamentally

based on the premise of defending one's key assets.<sup>7</sup> Although it may prove more exciting and glamorous to formulate potential means of emasculating the enemy, one must never forget that the enemy is simultaneously applying those techniques on friendly assets.

Decisions concerning appropriate distribution of combat assets are fundamental, yet challenging, operational considerations. As always, tradeoffs exist. Those forces dedicated to protection of own COGs are rendered unavailable for attacks on the assets of the enemy. "The enemy's center of gravity should be attacked with all available forces and assets but that may mean providing inadequate forces for the protection of one's own COG and for conducting operational fires."<sup>8</sup> It is the commander's insight, intuition, and experience that leads to success in this, one of the more "artful" aspects of operational art.

Proper application of the tenets of operational design lie in correct determination of a plan to promote the enemy's defeat while *simultaneously* assuring adequate protection of one's own centers of gravity.

## **SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN THE IDENTIFICATION AND PROTECTION OF OWN COGS: HISTORICAL EXAMPLES**

The following analysis is focused on three historical examples of the United States' application of military power



toward the achievement of national objectives. It reveals successes, failures, and some plain old good luck. In *most* cases, America emerged victorious. In war, however, "most cases" is not good enough. This analysis demonstrates that America *can* and *must* do better in the future.

Three examples are provided to illustrate each of three possible outcomes concerning identification and protection of one's own centers of gravity. In the first example, the Allied Invasion of Sicily during World War II, Allied planners failed to properly identify and protect their own COGs but were victorious in spite of their negligence. In the second example, the Vietnam War, America failed to identify and protect its own strategic COG and subsequently failed to achieve national objectives. In the final example, Operation Desert Storm, the United States skillfully identified and protected its own COGs, and, subsequently, was overwhelmingly successful.

**Invasion of Sicily, 1943.** The first example, the Allied Invasion of Sicily in July of 1943, was a large scale and vitally important amphibious operation. By gaining control of Sicily, the Allies would achieve their strategic objectives of "securing sea lanes through the Mediterranean, trying to knock Italy out of the war, and diverting German strength from the Russian front."

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, as Supreme Allied Commander, tasked his Deputy Commander in Chief, General Alexander, with

the preparation of a plan to invade the island and secure key port facilities for a subsequent attack on the Italian mainland. Operation Husky, the largest amphibious assault ever conducted, was the result.<sup>10</sup>

In order to successfully conduct an amphibious assault, air superiority is essential. Surface and ground forces are exceptionally vulnerable to air attack during the ship-to-shore landing phase. As a result, an amphibious assault requires a comprehensive plan to gain and maintain air superiority. This is the very essence of operational protection.

In Operation Husky, General Alexander's operational center of gravity was his amphibious convoy and its landing force cargo. One would expect military planners to spare no effort in ensuring the protection of this most critical asset. This proved not to be the case.

During Operation Husky, plans did not develop as would be expected. During the preparatory phases, "the Air Forces refused to coordinate its planning with either the Army or Navy."<sup>11</sup> Although invasion planners stated emphatically what support they required, they did not know what they would ultimately receive. Admiral Cunningham, the Naval Forces Commander, dedicated six battleships to the protection of the convoy but air cover was uncertain.

Ground and naval commanders had no idea of the degree of protection they could expect, and when the assault troops set sail for Sicily, their commanders had not the faintest idea of when, where, under what

circumstances, and in what numbers they would see their own aircraft.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, there was no clearly established plan for the protection of the Allies' own COG, the amphibious forces. As far as the commanders knew, they were left undefended from airborne attack.

Fortunately for the Allies, the Air Forces were able to provide support for the landings as requested. Even more significantly, Axis forces were unaware, ill-prepared, or unwilling to engage the Allies in a militarily significant manner during the landing.

The Allied forces were extremely lucky on D-day for Operation Husky. General Eisenhower approved the invasion plan without insisting on the protection of air superiority for his own COG.<sup>13</sup> Only the conspicuous absence of opposition forces and the last minute decision of the Air Force to participate prevented a potentially catastrophic defeat for Allied forces. It is certainly appropriate to state, "a plan for a major naval operation or maritime campaign never should rely on the errors and mistakes of the opponent, and above all, not on miracles."<sup>14</sup> Although Operation Husky was ultimately a success, it is a vivid example of how *not* to do business with respect to own COG protection.

**The Vietnam War.** The second example, the Vietnam War, provides illustrative examples of failure to correctly identify centers of gravity on both the offensive and defensive sides of the war.

In its attempt to defeat the North Vietnamese, America failed to selectively attack and destroy the opponent's COG.

The early United States experience on Vietnam was based on a strategy that focused on none of the potentially valid North Vietnamese centers of gravity-the army, Hanoi, strategic leadership, their support base, or the community of interest with their allies. Instead, the focus was on the Viet Cong, an important strength and instrument of the north, but not a COG. The virtual destruction of the Viet Cong during the Tet Offensive of 1968 did not allow our strategic success, and our foe continued the war unabated.<sup>15</sup>

Not only did the United States fail to rapidly identify and attack the enemy's COG, it was unsuccessful in protecting its own strategic COG: the will of the American people.

Deluged by television footage of U.S. troops killed in action and starved for news of significant victories, the American people became disillusioned with the war. Limited public support was rapidly replaced by anti-war demonstrations while the administration made futile attempts to minimize the war's impact on American life. "In the Vietnam War, political, economic, and social factors conspired against the effective use of the military. The use of force alone could not achieve the strategic objective, and the *inappropriate* use of force ultimately damaged American interests."<sup>16</sup>

By failing to protect its strategic center of gravity, America allowed itself to be dragged into an extended war of attrition. Whether intentional or not, the North Vietnamese successfully attacked America's strategic COG.

Interestingly, the Vietnam War was the first time that the

U.S. media brought the brutality of combat into America's homes. This near real time exposure to battlefield activity had a dramatic impact on public support for the war. It is conceivable that the media had as much to do with eroding the national will as did enemy leadership.

North Vietnamese strategic leadership applied one of Sun Tzu's teachings more effectively than did that of the United States. "The master conqueror frustrated his enemy's plans and broke up his alliances....The enemy was isolated and demoralized; his will to resist broken."<sup>17</sup> Had America recognized, protected, and strengthened its strategic center of gravity, the outcome of the conflict may have been dramatically altered.

**Operation Desert Storm.** The third and final historical example is Operation Desert Storm. In this case, skillful analysis, preparation, and protection of America's own COGs, combined with systematic destruction of those of the enemy, produced a resoundingly successful evolution.

At the strategic level of war, coalitions and alliances can become centers of gravity. Their impact on the ability of member states to achieve national objectives must be carefully addressed. "The vulnerability of a coalition's center of gravity must be evaluated. In many instances, common political objectives that bind members may become the center of gravity."<sup>18</sup> The issue is largely based on perception.

The determinant here is how the enemy views the alliance. If the alliance is seen as trivial to the

main power, as in Adolf Hitler's alliances, alliance coalition does not constitute a valid center of gravity. For NATO, where the United States could not wage a war for Europe without European allies, alliance cohesion may form a center of gravity.<sup>19</sup>

President Bush and his top military planners were exceedingly careful to gain the political and military support of key nations before embarking on Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. This coalition of friendly forces evolved into a strategic center of gravity.<sup>20</sup> In an effort to maintain an impenetrable defense of this COG, American leaders devoted tremendous effort to the sustainment of alliance cohesion.

The criticality of the alliance to coalition success in the Gulf War was not lost on Saddam Hussein. It was for this reason that the Iraqis, by their Scud missile attacks, tried (unsuccessfully) to provoke Israel into reacting militarily. Had Israel responded, Iraq would have caused some or most Arab members to leave the coalition.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, during Desert Storm, American leaders did not fall into the same media trap experienced during the Vietnam War. By carefully controlling material distributed to the press, they successfully used the media to bolster, rather than erode, public support for coalition efforts.

Operation Desert Storm is an example of masterful understanding of the importance of centers of gravity. American leaders correctly identified the enemy's COGs as well as their own. They systematically attacked and neutralized opposition COGs while thwarting Saddam Hussein's every effort

to destroy those of the coalition. Operation Desert Storm demonstrated operational art in exemplary fashion.

## **FUTURE CENTERS OF GRAVITY: IS AMERICA PREPARED TO PROTECT THEM?**

Historical examples demonstrated both success and failure in America's ability to identify and protect its own centers of gravity. The essential question follows: Are today's warriors making correct preparations for tomorrow's decisive victory?

In future conflicts, proper identification and protection of friendly centers of gravity will take on ever-increasing importance. There are four primary reasons for this evolution: Operation Desert Storm as a military training tool, dependence on information technologies, public scrutiny of military activity, and the "David and Goliath" syndrome.

**Operation Desert Storm as a Military Training Tool.** First, one must acknowledge the widespread utility of Operation Desert Storm as a military training tool for the rest of the world, friend or foe. Viewed in such a context, it was wildly influential. Other than select punitive strikes and "rescue" operations, Desert Storm was the first major employment of United States military might since the Vietnam War. Nearly twenty years of steadily advancing technology significantly altered the way America went to war.

It was no secret that the United States would attempt to lead its allies to victory through superior technology and training. Desert Storm provided the world a vivid demonstration of emerging American capabilities.

For the first time, space capabilities were integrated into mission planning and execution....The result has been widespread appreciation for space forces throughout the Department of Defense. The Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force are all tuning their doctrines and operational concepts to take full advantage of the potential space offers....The flipside of this coin is that many nations, and certainly all the war colleges around the world, learned similar lessons from Desert Storm.<sup>22</sup>

Russia, our primary competitor from the former Soviet Union, has made major changes in its fundamental warfighting doctrine in light of its study of Operation Desert Storm.

Russia saw the extensive use of air power as decisive in limiting casualties while permitting a quick ground force victory....The Russians watched as the Soviet-style integrated and redundant air defense was dismantled. They have studied the coalition's use of long-range, stand-off precision weapons against a multitude of targets. And finally, they have become aware of the significance of the US-led coalition that not only came together but stayed together.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, lessons were learned from each of the key contributors to America's warfighting success: space systems, air supremacy, joint and combined operations, smart weapons, and coalition building.

The Chinese also viewed Operation Desert Storm with great interest. As rulers of one of the few remaining Communist regimes, China's elite did not let this demonstration of Western warfighting techniques slip by unobserved. "The



performance of high technology weapons systems used by US-led forces, combined with the manner in which the Western powers conducted that modern local war, made a strong impression (to the point of shock) on advocates in Beijing of the 'People's War Under Modern Conditions' "24

To summarize the impact of Operation Desert Storm, most of those nations with whom America would be least likely to share technology or training secrets observed the operation with *great* interest. Furthermore, if Russia and China learned lessons from the performance of the United States, as potential arms and military training suppliers in the world market, those lessons will likely be passed on to eager client states.

**Information Technologies.** A second reason for increased future emphasis on protection of own COGs is that of information technologies and the development of the digital battlefield. The United States' increased dependence on information technologies as battlefield decision-making tools produces centers of gravity that were not previously valid.

As the United States continues along its path to a smaller but increasingly sophisticated fighting force, the availability of information takes on new military significance. As commanders become more proficient in the assimilation and application of information on the battlefield, their reliance on it will increase accordingly.

As meaningful as it is for us to understand how to optimize the management of information on the

digital battlefield, it is becoming increasingly important to protect this capability. The need to protect information and the digital battlefield will increase as the Army's dependence on information continues to grow, and information and knowledge become a military center of gravity.<sup>25</sup>

If information becomes "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends"<sup>26</sup> then its protection, as a center of gravity, will assume the utmost importance.

**Public Scrutiny of Military Operations.** A third factor supporting increased criticality of proper identification and protection of own COGs is less clearly defined. It is found in the more nebulous area of the psycho-social trends of American society.

In an era of decaying budgets, reduced military spending, and increased public scrutiny of government programs and activities, American failure in armed conflict is simply unacceptable. At the first sign of incompetence, indecision, or "unnecessary" loss of life, public support is likely to be lost and strategic objectives abandoned.

Faced with steadily decaying budgets and decreased spending on military programs, missteps in the planning and execution of military evolutions must be eliminated. The United States will be forced to be more particular about when and where it chooses to bring military forces to bear.

When selected for employment, combat assets must be correctly and precisely applied in support of national objectives. Strategic failures may have catastrophic downstream effects on budgetary, procurement and force

employment issues.

Furthermore, even when America's vital interests are at stake, it is becoming essential "to sell" the American people on the necessity of employing the nation's armed forces. Once that support is attained, a more observant and critical public will scrutinize combat performance at all levels.

As mentioned earlier in the analyses of the Vietnam War and Operation Desert Storm, one must never overlook the potential impact of the media in maintaining popular support. The so-called "CNN factor" provides the public with the ability to evaluate America's success on its own terms.

*Especially* in this information-rich world, American political and military leadership can not afford another ill-planned and poorly executed evolution such as the Vietnam War.

**The "David and Goliath" Syndrome.** The fourth and final reason for devoting increased attention to own COGs may be the most compelling.

For the foreseeable future, America's potential combat opponents will suffer qualitative and quantitative disadvantages when compared to U.S. assets. For a would-be aggressor to have even a finite chance of victory against this militarily superior foe, a direct attack on the opponent's strategic center of gravity may provide the best opportunity for success. As potential defenders, a comprehensive plan for America's operational protection is imperative.

A reference to the biblical "David and Goliath" story

provides an appropriate framework for this discussion. A quick review of a hypothetical "Who's Who Among Global Superpowers" reveals that the United States is the only current entry...the sole "Goliath." Correspondingly, potential challengers to America's military might would fall into the larger category of less powerful "Davids."

Presented with this situation, America's would-be aggressors face disadvantages that would render a traditional faceoff between combat forces futile. Unless suicidal or terminally ignorant, potential aggressors must "fight smarter, not harder" in order to win. As underdogs, they must attack America on fronts other than those whereupon traditional armies clash. Instead of tank versus tank or fighter versus fighter, tomorrow's "Davids" must neutralize strategic COGs to force "Goliath" to abandon his objectives. *Pity the superpower who allows this to happen.*

## CONCLUSIONS

A military strategist's greatest and most exciting challenge is the development of a plan to attain victory in war. This immense undertaking is founded upon decisive attacks on the enemy's centers of gravity. Herein lies the most obvious key to the attainment of one's objectives and the essence of operational art.

One must never forget, however, that these same "obvious"

principles are being applied to friendly assets by an enemy who is equally determined to triumph in armed conflict. The United States has shown considerable prowess in identifying and neutralizing enemy COGs. Protection of America's *own* COGs has been more troublesome and requires increased emphasis.

To triumph in future conflicts, America must adhere resolutely to the proven principles of operational design. When asked the simple question concerning friendly centers of gravity, "Does anyone care?", America must be the first to respond with an immediate and sincere "YES."

As Sun Tzu stated long before the advent of "operational art" as we know it, "Know your enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles, you will never be in peril."<sup>27</sup>

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